

The Role-based Interview

By John Carstensen

The role-based interview is primarily an accuracy-based speaking and listening activity in which ESL students adopt the role of a person in a newspaper article. They then answer questions posed by other students in the role of interviewers in a simulated press conference. Reading and discussion are involved in the preparatory stages and the activity lends itself readily to incorporating a writing task. It is best suited to an intermediate or higher level class but may be adapted for use at a slightly more elementary level.

Dealing successfully with authentic material is generally motivating for second language learners. In this activity they experience the satisfaction of drawing out real information to discover the details of an interesting, and usually, amusing story.

Selection of Text

Look for short human interest type articles of about 100 words. You can scour your dailies and occasionally find something suitable but the tabloids are often a richer source. *The Weekly World News*, published in the U.S.A. and distributed throughout the world, carries feature articles distinguished more for their creative journalistic license than their veracity. But its focus on the sensational and bizarre makes interesting reading and it provides suitably short articles gleaned from around the world. Like most tabloids, its language is less formal and more idiomatic than that of the dailies.

Some examples of articles I have used are the fast-food diner in London who found a diamond in his hamburger; the cow that fell through the roof of a house in Camaroon; the scuba diver in Peru who was caught by a fisherman; the driverless car in America that circled a busy intersection in reverse for two hours; the heart attack victim in Switzerland who was dragged three blocks to hospital by his pet dachshund; the golfer in Wales whose tee shot struck a sheep which then carried the ball wedged under its tail and dropped it 30 metres closer to the hole. There are also a variety of articles involving violence and death. Deference however, to cultural and individual sensitivity may preclude the use of such material.

Procedure

There are various procedures. The simplest one, which can best be used in a small class, is to give a copy of an article to one student-perhaps a day or two before the class activity-to read and assimilate the information. Then thoroughly brief the student on his/her role and what sort of questions to expect. This is particularly important if you are introducing the role-based interview as a new activity. It is strongly recommended to model yourself as the interviewee the first time.

Introduce the student interviewee in his/her assumed role with just enough information to prompt "What happened." type questions that will draw the story out. For example: "This is Peter Croke. Mr. Croke had a stroke of luck while playing golf recently."

Sheepish golfer has unlikely tail

A British golfer couldn't believe his luck when his tee shot wedged under the tail of a sheep which then wandered 30m closer to the hole and dropped the ball.

Teacher Peter Croke went on to win the match at the Southerndown Golf Club near Porthcawl in Wales.

"The sheep looked mildly surprised by the whole thing but we were in hysterics," he said. "The sheep walked off toward the 17th hole and then seemed to shake the ball free like laying an egg." -Reuter

Waikato Times, June 3, 1995

The interviewers may need some prompting in order to draw out the details of the event and other information in the text. Some biographical details are usually included: nationality, age, and occupation. "How did you feel when." type questions should also be encouraged to elicit characters' reactions. The interviewee should answer all questions, inventing answers when the information is not provided in the text. Interesting variations for the interview are to have more than one interviewee where the article has more than one protagonist, or to assign the interviewee the role of an animal in the story.

Follow-up Activities

I usually have the interviewers write notes during the interview and write their own reports after the interview. If this is done in class time it often provokes further questions for clarification.

After the writing is completed and corrected, students are presented with copies of the original text and the interviewee fields questions on vocabulary. The initial briefing makes it clear that this is his/her responsibility. However, s/he may need some assistance, especially with idioms. My interviewee for the golfing story was a Japanese golf enthusiast. Normally a very reserved student, he became quite expansive when he had to explain the meanings of golfing terms. While dealing with the vocabulary, we discussed the two puns in the headline and the "stroke of luck" from my introductory comment and the practice of punning generally.

The primary focus throughout these activities is on meaning. Now that the meaning of the original text is clearly established, the students may profitably be exposed to a study of selected grammatical and other structural features of the text. Particular phrases and sentences can be highlighted and discussed as they relate to whatever structural syllabus is being followed. You may also ask the students to spot grammatical errors in the original text.

Procedural Variations

The interview procedure may be varied to accommodate larger classes, lower ability levels, or to maximise student speaking time.

A class of, say, 12 students can be provided with four different texts. Groups of three can discuss the same text so that each student becomes familiar with the content. The students then form three groups of four with the four different texts represented in each group. Each student takes a turn at being interviewed and three turns at interviewing.

Interviews may also be conducted as paired activities using two texts for a class of any size. The task sheets (Appendix 1 and 2) illustrate this arrangement and the use of more directed interview instructions, given that a number of interviews cannot be monitored simultaneously. This format is also more suited to lower level classes. Students can first work in groups with the same text as previously to discuss content, check answers, and formulate questions for their interviewer role, and the teacher can more readily assist at this preparatory stage.

Conclusion

The role-based interview is a versatile activity best suited to a small class but may be used in a class of any size. It employs readily available, intrinsically interesting authentic material. The different stages practice all four generic language skills but the core activity focuses on speaking and listening. It demands accuracy to bridge successfully the information gap and it provides ESL students with a relatively enjoyable means of practising accurate communication skills.

Appendix 1

You are Student A.

Read this article.

Hero pooch drags dying man 3 blocks

BERN, Switzerland - A heroic weenie dog clamped her jaws on her dying master's coat collar and

dragged the 158 pound man three blocks to the hospital where doctors saved his life!

Bruno Schild, 51, was walking with his dog in the early hours when he keeled over from a heart attack.

Schild, who remained conscious throughout the ordeal, said there was no one around at that hour. His dachshund, Greta, amazingly managed to drag him to the emergency room three blocks away.

Weekly World News, November 29, 1994

You are Bruno Schild.

Student B will interview you.

S/he will ask:

- what happened to you,
- how your dog saved you,
- what kind of dog you have,
- what your dog's name is,
- where you are from,
- how old you are,
- how much you weigh,

anything else s/he wants to know about you.

After Student B has interviewed you, you will interview Student B.

Student B is Oskar Keysell.

Mr. Keysell recently found a diamond.

Find out: where he found the diamond,
how much it is worth,
what he did when he found it,
what happened then,
if he kept the diamond,
where he is from,
how old he is,

anything else you want to know about him.

Take notes.

Write a report on the incident.

Appendix 2

You are Student B.

You will interview Student A.

Student A is Bruno Schild.

Mr. Schild's dog recently saved his life.

Find out:

- what happened to Mr. Schild,
- how his dog saved him,
- what kind of dog he has,
- the dog's name,
- where Mr. Schild is from,
- how old he is.
- how much he weighs,

anything else you want to know about him.

Take notes.

Write a report on the incident.

After you have interviewed Student A, s/he will interview you.

You are now Oskar Keysell in the following article.

Man finds diamond in hamburger

LONDON - A man bit into a hamburger at a fast-food joint and found a \$1,500 diamond in it - so the befuddled manager of the restaurant apologized and gave him a free burger!

None of the workers at the restaurant were wearing jewelry, so lucky Oskar Keysell, 31, got to keep the valuable stone along with the extra burger.

Weekly World News February 14, 1995

Student A will ask:

- where you found the diamond.
- how much it is worth.
- what you did when you found it.
- what happened then.
- if you kept the diamond.
- where you are from.
- how old you are.

anything else s/he wants to know about you.

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